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SUBJECT: Syria/Spain, Lavrov, Palestinian Territories, Arab League,
Lebanon, Iraq (2/22)

¶1. Summary: Syrian papers on Feb. 22 reported FM Walid al-Mouallem's visit to Madrid and his meeting with his Spanish FM Miguel Angel Moratinos on Feb. 21. Talks focused on bilateral relations, regional issues, most importantly the situation in the occupied territories following the Mecca Accord, and the situation in Iraq. Both sides stressed the importance of achieving stability and security in Iraq and maintaining its unity, territorial integrity, independence and sovereignty. FM Mouallem briefed his Spanish counterpart on Syria's efforts to boost stability and security in Iraq to reach national reconciliation that will guarantee its unity and regional safety.

Papers also reported Russian FM Sergey Lavrov's interview with "al-Watan al-Arabi" magazine published in Moscow on Feb. 21 in which he emphasized that solving Mideast issues requires holding a positive dialogue with all parties concerned, including Syria and Iran, which are important and effective parties in the region. "Russia calls for including Syria in the Mideast peace process and solving the Iraqi issue," Lavrov said. "Russia positively evaluates communications between Syria and Iraq, as well as the resumption of diplomatic relations," Lavrov said. He added that Russia is linked by traditional friendly relations with Iran and Syria, expressing concern over attempts by some foreign sides to direct baseless and incorrect accusations against these two countries.

On the issue of Israeli excavations around the al-Aqsa Mosque, papers reported that Mohammed Sa'eed Bkhitan, Regional Assistant Secretary of the Ba'ath Party, said in a meeting on Feb. 21 with a

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Palestinian delegation concerned with Jerusalem affairs, that the Israeli occupation of Arab territories is the main reason behind problems in the region. "Israel has been rejecting international resolutions and hindering the peace process in the region," Bkhitan said, reiterating the importance of facing every Israeli attempt to change the Arab Islamic identity of Jerusalem. He confirmed that the Israeli excavations around the al-Aqsa mosque and Jerusalem constitute an obvious violation of Jerusalem's Arab and Islamic identity that provokes Arab and Moslem feelings across the world.

Papers also cited a statement by Arab League Assistant Secretary

General Ahmad Bin Hili to Tunisian "al-Chourouk" newspaper, published Feb. 21, stressing that the AL General Assembly has not received any request from any country to modify the Arab Peace Initiative of the 2002 Beirut Summit. Bin Hili said that "modification of the Arab Peace Initiative is not scheduled for the forthcoming Arab summit." He added that the peace initiative reflects the Arab strategic vision for a just settlement of the Arab-Israeli conflict, calling for marketing this initiative on the international level.

End of summary.

12. Selected Headlines:

"Foreign Minister Mouallem holds official talks with Spanish FM Miguel Angel Moratinos on bilateral relations and latest developments in the Palestinian and Iraqi arenas" (Government-owned Tishreen, 2/22)

"Russian FM Sergey Lavrov expresses astonishment at haste at the Security Council to form and endorse the international tribunal: Syria and Iran must be included in Middle East peace and Iraq." (Government-owned Al-Ba'th, 2/22)

"Regional Assistant Secretary of the Ba'ath Party Mohammed Said Bkhitan calls for facing Israeli attempts to Judaize Jerusalem and jeopardize the al-Aqsa Mosque" (Government-owned Tishreen, 2/22)

"Fleeing the Hell of Iraq, withdrawal of British, Danish and Lithuanian troops from Iraq has already been scheduled" (Government-owned Tishreen, 2/22)

"British PM Tony Blair calls his forces to return to London. Senator Biden calls on Bush to follow Blair's steps. Denmark completes withdrawal of its troops from Iraq" (Government-owned Al-Thawra, 2/22)

"The Lebanese army's anti-aircraft batteries fire at Israeli warplanes violating Lebanese airspace. The Lebanese opposition warns against US intentions" (Government-owned Tishreen, 2/22)

"The Quartet awaits formation of the Palestinian government. Russia and the UN call for removing ban on Hamas" (Government-owned Al-Ba'th, 2/22)

"Israel steps up provocations against Palestinians and makes hasty progress towards building 3,000 settlement units in the West Bank" (Government-owned Tishreen, 2/22)

"The Arab League prepares agenda for the upcoming Ministerial meeting. Bin Hili: No one requested modification of the Arab peace initiative" (Government-owned Al-Ba'th, 2/22)

13. Editorial Block Quotes:

"Civilization of the US Master"

Isam Dari, Chief Editor of government-owned Tishrin, said (2/22): "Americans come from overseas to give us lessons in freedom, democracy, and human rights. They love us so much that they bring us gifts of warships, aircraft carriers, and cruise missiles capable of distributing death equally and without discrimination between one group and another....

"Americans not only want to educate us; they also want to discipline troublemakers.... For the American master, the troublemaker is everyone who rejects Washington's orders; everyone who opposes the policy of diktats and makes a free, independent, and sovereign decision, uninfluenced by the hegemony of the Zionists in the Bush administration; and everyone who engages in resistance to regain his land and rights....

"The American policy is characterized by full disdain for peoples' right to live, by perpetration of mass massacres worldwide, and by flagrant hostility toward humanity.... Americans are exporting death and hatred to us, promoting sedition, wars, and chaos, and inventing racist and chauvinist theories of which 'the clash of civilizations' is not the most dangerous."

"Stagnant Commodity and Bankrupt Agents"

Khalid al-Ashhab, a commentator in government-owned Al-Thawra, wrote (2/22): "In US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice's recent remark, that Fouad al-Saniora's government in Lebanon is the spearhead of US plans in the region, is a full and indirect declaration of political and diplomatic bankruptcy. The remark also shows the ideological bankruptcy of neoconservatives, the futility of their mentality and their failure to implement any of the US plans in the Arab region.

"Perhaps Rice's characterization of the March 14 team in Lebanon, in addition to the assurances it must have received through undeclared channels, might have pushed this team to the level of political obscenity and vulgar practices....

"Naturally, President Bush's policies and strategies have failed on the level of both the United States and the world, but their failure will be even more resounding and they will have no glimpse of hope as long as their agents and distributors are people like those who are entrenched in Lebanese authority from the March 14 team, people who fell, and with them their US commodity, into the abyss of obscenity, abuse, and vilification...."

"Running in a Vicious Circle"

Umar Jaftali, a commentator in government-owned Tishrin, wrote (2/22): "It was clear from the very beginning that the meeting among Palestinian President Mahmud Abbas, Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert, and US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice was nothing but a media bubble to show that the political process on the Palestinian-Israeli track is still alive.

"US and Israeli statements before, during, and after the meeting showed that the United States and Israel only want to abort the Palestinian agreement, hinder the effort to form a Palestinian national unity government, and bring the situation in the occupied Palestinian territories back to the square of domestic fighting on the pretext that Palestinians have not met international demands....

"The US Administration deals with the Palestinian problem with the logic of boycott, isolation, and evasion of UN resolutions and even of the few positive points in the Quartet's plan. This drives Israelis toward further intransigence and paves the way for them to further swallow Palestinian rights and avoid the issues of a permanent solution, namely, Jerusalem, the border, and the refugees."

Corbin